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VCU Menorah Review

For the Enrichment of Jewish Thought

Summer/Fall 2009 no. 71

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Abraham: A Seminal Personality

By Daniel Grossberg

Abraham: Trials of Family and Faith, Terence E. Fretheim, Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2007. 262 PP.

Abraham: Trials of Family and Faith is a fine addition to the *Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament* series of the USC Press. The book is an easily readable work, accessible to the student and scholar alike. Thomas E. Fretheim, a seasoned biblical researcher, includes extensive endnotes and a comprehensive bibliography at the end of the book where they serve as resources for the investigator and not as interferences for the more casual reader. A notable merit of this study is the author's treatment of less-addressed themes alongside more familiar ones. This is no small matter for a researcher conducting significant scholarship on so prominent a biblical personality as "Abraham."

Conventional biblical scholarship sharply separates the "primeval history" of Genesis 1-11 from the "ancestral history" of Genesis 12-50. The first 11 chapters of Scripture present a broad universal narrative of *all* of humankind over "the *whole* earth." Genesis 12:1-3 brings sharply into focus *one* individual and his family, from *one* Mesopotamian village, who is called to be the progenitor of a specific people. Fretheim opens his study, nevertheless, by relating the story of Abraham in Genesis 12-25 with the preceding chapters 1-11, insisting on the universal frame of reference as a key to understanding Abraham.

The Abrahamic narratives became the stories of successive generations of the people of God. Our author seeks an understanding of the genre of the Abraham narratives. The several episodes in Genesis 12-25 depict God as directly engaged in the life of Abraham. "The sheer existence of this family and their ongoing life is a God-generated reality." (p. 15). Fretheim thus suggests the designation "theological narrative/story" as particularly appropriate for the type of literature of Genesis 12-25. In an insightful close textual reading, our researcher adduces

numerous verbal and thematic parallels in several episodes of the Abraham stories and other parts of the Hebrew Bible, especially in the book of Exodus. Abraham, consequently, appears to prefigure Israel's history. The "theological narrative" designation thus gains even greater importance as it applies also to the nation's history.

The greater part of *Abraham: Trials of Family and Faith* treats the role of God's elected and the "outsider" or the "other" in their varying relationships from interesting perspectives. Among these are the following: Abraham and Sarah, the elected, as they receive divine promises and also Hagar and Ishmael, the "others," and the promises they receive; the episode of Abraham and Sarah in Egypt (Gen 12:10-13:1) with a concentration on the outsider as posing a danger to the elected; Abraham, Lot and Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 13:1-18). As a result of his choices, Lot loses his "insider" status and is swallowed up into the culture of Sodom and Gomorrah. "Outsiders may present a threat to the chosen people but those threats are not unrelated to choices that the insiders' make. Choices can jeopardize blessings." (p. 69); Abraham as he takes up the cause of Sodom and Gomorrah filled with non-chosen people; and also Abraham and his family as beneficiaries of blessings from outsiders in several encounters with them (e.g., Pharaoh in 12:16, Melchizedek in 14:19 and Abimelech in 20:14).

Fretheim devotes a chapter to the narratives dealing with Isaac and closes his study with "Abraham in Memory and Tradition," a chapter in which he traces the story of Abraham as it appears in the rest of the Hebrew Bible, the Apocrypha, the Pseudepigrapha, the Greek Scriptures and more briefly in the Qur'an.

The only shortcoming this reviewer noted in an otherwise fine volume is the author's occasional anachronistic vision. Two examples follow: In Fretheim's discussion of circumcision, he states that a lack of faithfulness to the covenant will lead to severe consequences the male will be "cut off" from his people. Fretheim then states, "Even though women may be included in the covenant community only by virtue of being members of a household where the males are circumcised, it

is notable that they are not said to be cut off. It is possible that the covenant promises would continue to be applicable to them." (p. 43). It is only by a misapplication of the modern notion of equality of men and women to the biblical legal system that Fretheim could say that "it is notable that they [women] are not said to be cut off." In the Hebrew Bible, women are not addressed in the matters of law. Within the biblical legal system, legislation is made formally only to the male. The second example of anachronistic thinking is in his reference to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as "environmental catastrophe," "environmental disaster," "environmental disruption" and "anti-life" and "anticreational" (p. 76-77) This reviewer does not think that these terms clarify the text. They merely introduce foreign issues and sensibilities unknown to the ancients. These points, however, are small ones. The merits of the book are far greater.

Abraham: Trials of Family and Faith is a valuable study of a seminal personality in the history of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Terence E. Fretheim's literary and theological sophistication is apparent on every page.

Daniel Grossberg is professor of Judaic Studies at the University of Albany and a contributing editor.

Author's Reflections

***Jewish Philanthropy and Enlightenment in Late-Tsarist Russia* Seattle: University of Washington Press.**

By Brian Horowitz

This project began in 2000, when on a fellowship to write a book on Jews in the Russian Elite culture, I discovered the archive of the Society for the Promotion of Enlightenment among the Jews of Russia. Realizing the goldmine that I had stumbled upon, I decided to devote all my time to reading this enormous archive.

The topic of the OPE (as the society was known according to its acronym, *Obshchestvo dlia rasprostraneniia prosveshcheniia*) intrigued me because it weaves together the lives and ideas of the most important individuals among Russia's Jews of the late-tsarist period: Simon Dubnov, Maxim Vinaver, Yuly Bratskus, Leon Bramson and Leib Katsenelson. The central shtadlonim were involved in the society Baron Evzel Guenzburg, Horace Guenzburg and Samuel Polyakov. The interaction of philanthropists and intellectuals, philanthropy and enlightenment characterize the society.

The story that the book argues against is that the society, which began in 1863, and which gave so much hope to Russia's Jews, quickly petered out and was powerless and ineffectual, despite the fact that it existed until the Bolsheviks closed it in 1929. My claim is that the society did go through a period of weakness, but that it became revived in the 1880s thanks to the Jewish nationalist movement. Certainly, OPE's leaders devoted themselves to the establishment of modern Jewish schools, training teachers for these schools, and library creation, but at the same time the society put forth its own image of a modern Jew. Basing their idea on Judah Leib Gordon's "man in the street, Jew in one's tents," the society's leaders wanted to produce a Jew who was equal to any Russian in his knowledge of secular culture and also fully Jewish by virtue of knowledge about Jewish culture.

This kind of modern Jew inhabited a political space "between cosmo-

politanism and nationalism," "assimilation and national isolation." The Jewish individual was supposed to pursue acculturation with the Russian elite and at the same time build institutions for Jewish cultural, economic, and political enrichment. It was an attempt to give Jews a future in Russia that provided not only for their survival, but their renaissance.

Because the society's program was broad and for the most part, undefined, it attracted various groups and different ideologies, although, admittedly, the dominant ideology was bourgeois liberalism. The alliance of the wealthy and the intellectuals brought results. When the society could open branches as a result of the political relaxation after the Revolution 1905, 25 opened quickly. The budget of the society was over one million rubles in 1912, and more than 200 schools were run by the society. During World War I, the society played a successful role in the education of Jewish refugees, although critics claimed that the society imposed on the refugees a secular Jewish education in Yiddish, or, in other words, something alien to their traditions.

Although the 10,000 students in OPE educational institutions made up a small number vis-à-vis the Jewish population as a whole, one can claim that the society played an important role in fashioning a curriculum for Jewish schools in the country as a whole. By formulating a clear program that envisioned the emergence of a Jewish liberal, the society helped make that vision a reality. In addition, the society had an influence beyond its numbers and means. It played central roles in the construction of a Jewish civil society, Jewish politics and culture, and in Russian political life. By promoting secular education, Jewish social and political life, and fashioning a new liberal identity, the OPE positioned itself front and center in late-tsarist Jewish life.

Brian Horowitz, a contributing editor, is Sizeler Family Chair of Jewish Studies and Director of the German and Slavic Studies Department at Tulane University.

Books in Brief: New and Notable

Culture Front: Representing Jews in Eastern Europe, edited by Benjamin Nathans and Gabriella Safran. Philadelphia: Penn Press.

For most of the last four centuries, the broad expanse of territory between the Baltic and the Black Seas, known since the Enlightenment as “Eastern Europe,” has been home to the world’s largest Jewish population. The Jews of Poland, Russia, Lithuania, Galicia, Romania and Ukraine were prodigious generators of modern Jewish culture. Their volatile blend of religious traditionalism and precocious quests for collective self-emancipation lies at the heart of *Culture Front*.

This volume brings together contributions by both historians and literary scholars to take readers on a journey across the cultural history of East European Jewry from the mid-17th century to the present. The articles collected here explore how Jews and their Slavic neighbors produced and consumed imaginative representations of Jewish life in chronicles, plays, novels, poetry, memoirs, museums and more.

The book puts culture at the forefront of analysis, treating verbal artistry itself as a kind of frontier through which Jews and Slavs imagined, experienced and negotiated with themselves and each other. The four sections investigate the distinctive themes of that frontier: violence and civility; popular culture; politics and aesthetics; and memory. The result is a fresh exploration of ideas and movements that helped change the landscape of modern Jewish history.

Antisemitic Myths: A Historical and Contemporary Anthology, edited by Marvin Perry and Frederick M. Schweitzer. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

The revival of anti-Semitism in Europe and the demonization of Jews in parts of the Muslim world give special importance to the exposure of the myths and lies that for centuries led people to regard Jews as the dangerous “other” and that led to violence and persecution. This provocative anthology presents 90 documents that focus on the na-

ture, evolution, and meaning of the principal myths that have made anti-Semitism such a lethal force in history: Jews as decides, ritual murderers, agents of Satan, international conspirators, and conniving, unscrupulous Shylocks. Also included are documents illustrating the recent revival of classical myths about Jews among black nationalists, Holocaust deniers, and Islamic fundamentalists.

Flory: A Miraculous Story of Survival by Flory A. Van Beek. San Francisco: HarperOne

A Dutch-Jewish Holocaust survivor now living in California, Van Beek recalls her harrowing experiences at the mercy of the Nazis. In 1939, fearing a German invasion of Holland, the 18-year-old Van Beek left her Rotterdam family for Argentina with her German-Jewish boyfriend, Felix. But German mines sank their ship; seriously injured, they recuperated in England, but were refused permanent residency there and arrived back in Holland right before the Germans. In the panic of the invasion, Van Beek's aunt and her family attempted suicide, with one cousin succeeding. Anti-Jewish pogroms and deportations escalated, and in 1942 Van Beek, now living with her mother's family in the Dutch town of Amersfoort, received a summons to report to a German work camp. A chance meeting with an altruistic Resistance member resulted in hiding places for the couple and some family members. But Van Beek's mother was deported to Westerbork and a poignant letter that she threw from the train headed to Auschwitz, where she was murdered, managed to reach Van Beek. Although the author's rudimentary writing skills hinder her memoir, this has intrinsic value as a Holocaust survivor testimony.

Resurrection: The Power of God for Christians and Jews by Kevin J. Madigan and Job D. Levenson. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

This book, written for religious and nonreligious people alike in clear and accessible language, Although this expectation, known as the resurrection of the dead, is widely understood to have been a part of Christianity from its beginnings nearly two thousand years ago, many

people are surprised to learn that the Jews believed in resurrection long before the emergence of Christianity. In this sensitively written and historically accurate book, religious scholars Kevin J. Madigan and Jon D. Levenson aim to clarify confusion and dispel misconceptions about Judaism, Jesus, and Christian origins.

Madigan and Levenson tell the fascinating but little-known story of the origins of the belief in resurrection, investigating why some Christians and some Jews opposed the idea in ancient times while others believed it was essential to their faith. The authors also discuss how the two religious traditions relate their respective practices in the here and now to the new life they believe will follow resurrection. Making the rich insights of contemporary scholars of antiquity available to a wide readership, Madigan and Levenson offer a new understanding of Jewish-Christian relations and of the profound connections that tie the faiths together.

For the Love of God and People by Elliot N. Dorff. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

Every generation of Jews in every denomination of Judaism finds itself facing complex legal issues. The status of same-sex unions and stem-cell research are just two of a myriad of thorny questions Jewish legal experts grapple with today. How do the rabbis who draft responses to these questions reach their conclusions? What informs their decisions? Dorff addresses these and other questions in this intelligent, accessible guide to the philosophy that shapes Jewish law.

The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews by Saul Friedlander. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

The enactment of German extermination policies and measures depended on the cooperation of local authorities, the assistance of police forces, and the passivity of the populations, primarily of their political and spiritual elites. This implementation depended as well on the victims' readiness to submit to orders, often with the hope of attenuating them or of surviving long enough to escape the German vise. This

multifaceted study at all levels and in different places enhances the perception of the magnitude, complexity, and interrelatedness of the many components of this history. Based on a vast array of documents and an overwhelming choir of voices mainly from diaries, letters, and memoirs Saul Friedlnder avoids domesticating the memory of these unprecedented and horrific events. The convergence of these various aspects gives a unique quality to this work in which the history of the Holocaust has found its definitive representation.

Fire in the Ashes: God, Evil, and the Holocaust, edited and introduced by David Patterson and John K. Roth. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

This book explores how inquiry about the Holocaust challenges understanding, especially its religious and ethical dimensions. Debates about God's relationship to evil are ancient, but the Holocaust complicated them in ways never before imagined. Its massive destruction left Jews and Christians searching among the ashes to determine what, if anything could repair the damage done to tradition and to theology.

Since the end of the Holocaust, Jews and Christians have increasingly sought to know how or even whether theological analysis and reflection can aid in comprehending its aftermath. Specifically, Jews and Christians, individually and collectively find themselves more and more in the position of needing either to rethink theodicy or to abolish the concept altogether.

Contributors to *Fire in the Ashes* confront these and other difficult questions about God and evil after the Holocaust. This book represents an effort to advance meaningful conversation between Jews and Christians and to encourage others to participate in similar inquiries.

The Last Jews in Baghdad: Remembering A Lost Homeland by Nissim Rejwan. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Baghdad was home to a flourishing Jewish community. More than a third of the city's people were Jews, and Jewish customs and holidays

helped set the pattern of Baghdad's cultural and commercial life. Jews, Muslims and Christians all native-born Iraqis intermingled, speaking virtually the same colloquial Arabic and sharing a common sense of national identity. And then, almost overnight it seemed, the state of Israel was born, and lines were drawn between Jews and Arabs. Over the next couple of years, nearly the entire Jewish population of Baghdad fled their homeland, never to return.

In this beautifully written memoir, Nissim Rejwan recalls the lost Jewish community of Baghdad, in which he was a child and young man from the 1920s through 1951. He describes his deep ambivalence as he bid a last farewell to a homeland that had become hostile to its native Jews.

Antisemitic Myths: A Historical and Contemporary Anthology, edited by Marvin Perry and Frederick M. Schweitzer. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

The current revival of anti-Semitism in Europe and the demonization of Jews in parts of the Muslim world give special importance to the exposure of the myths and lies that for centuries led people to regard Jews as the dangerous "other" and that led to violence and persecution. This provocative anthology presents 90 documents that focus on the nature, evolution, and meaning of the principal myths that have made anti-Semitism such a lethal force in history: Jews as deicides, ritual murderers, agents of Satan, international conspirators, and conniving, unscrupulous rogues. Also included are documents illustrating the recent revival of classical myths about Jews among black nationalists, Holocaust deniers, and Islamic fundamentalists.

Greece: A Jewish History by K. E. Fleming. Princeton University Press

This is the first comprehensive English-language history of Greek Jews, and the only history that includes material on their Diaspora in Israel and the U.S. The book tells the story of a people who for the most part no longer exist and whose identity is a paradox in that it wasn't fully formed until after most Greek Jews had emigrated or been deported

and killed by the Nazis.

For centuries, Jews lived in areas that are now part of Greece. But Greek Jews as a nationalized group existed in substantial number only for a few short decades from the Balkan Wars (1912-13) until the Holocaust, in which more than 80 percent were killed. Fleming describes their diverse histories and the processes that worked to make them emerge as a Greek collective. He also follows Jews as they left Greece as deportees to Auschwitz or migrants to Palestine/Israel and New York's Lower East Side. In such foreign settings their Greekness was emphasized as it never was in Greece, where Orthodox Christianity traditionally defines national identity and anti-Semitism remains common.

God's Mountain: The Temple Mount in Time, Place, and Memory by Yaron Z. Eliav. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

This provocative study of Jerusalem's Temple Mount unravels popular scholarly paradigms about the origins of this contested sacred site and its significance in Jewish and Christian traditions. Eliav reconstructs the early story of the Temple Mount, exploring the way the site was developed as a physical entity, religious concept, and cultural image. He traces the Temple Mount's origins and investigates its history, explicating the factors that shaped it both physically and conceptually.

Eliav refutes the popular tradition that situates the Temple Mount as a unique sacred space from the earliest days of the history of Israel and the Jewish people, asserting that it emerged as a sacred space in Jewish and early Christian consciousness towards the close of the Second Temple era in the first century CE. Eliav pinpoints three defining moments in the Temple Mount's physical history: King Herod's dramatic enlargement of the mount at the end of the first century BCE, the temple's destruction by the Roman emperor Titus in 70 CE, and Hadrian's actions in Jerusalem 60 years later. This new chronology provides the framework for a fresh consideration of the literary and archaeological evidence, as well as new understandings of the religious and social dynamics that shaped the image of the Temple Mount as a

sacred space for Jews and Christians.

Let Me Continue to Speak the Truth: Bertha Pappenheim as Author and Activist by Elizabeth Loentz. Cincinnati: HUC Press.

In 1953 Freud biographer Ernest Jones revealed that the famous hysteric Anna O. was really Bertha Pappenheim the prolific author, Austro-German Jewish feminist, social activist and pioneering social worker. This study directs attention away from the young woman who arguably invented the talking cure and back to Pappenheim and her post-Anna O. achievements, especially her writings, which reveal one of the most versatile, productive, influential, and controversial Jewish thinkers and leaders of her time.

More than half a century after her death, Pappenheim continues to inspire: "Strength, strength/Let me, in breath and heartbeat/Be filled by the rhythm/That carries justice and truth/from you, to you."

Never Despair: Sixty Years in the Service of the Jewish People and the Cause of Human Rights by Gerhart M. Riegner. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher

On August 6, 1942, Riegner, a 30-year-old counsel in the Geneva office of the World Jewish Congress, sent a message to Rabbi Stephen Wise in New York, warning of a plan discussed in Hitler's headquarters to deport to the east and "exterminate at one blow" all the Jews in European countries occupied or controlled by Germany 3.5 to 4 million people. This first recorded notice to the West of Hitler's "Final Solution" came to be known as the Riegner Telegram.

This is an essential book for students of the Holocaust and of the Jewish role in world affairs from World War II to the end of the century. There were many important and fascinating episodes in Riegner's life of service, told now in *Never Despair*, his memoir. He recounts his youth in a cultivated, middle-class Jewish family in Germany, and as a young lawyer in Leipzig who fled to Switzerland after Hitler's rise to power in 1933. In his memoir he recounts his efforts behind the

scenes and offers a firsthand estimate of many of the leading international figures of the past century.

Judaism Musical and Unmusical by Michael P. Steinberg. The University of Chicago Press.

Engaging the work of such figures as Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, and Leonard Bernstein, Michael Steinberg shows how modern Jews have advanced cosmopolitanism and multiplicity by helping to loosen whether by choice or necessity the ties that bind any culture to accounts of its origins. In the process, Steinberg composes a mosaic of texts and events, often distant from one another in time and place, that speak to his theme of musicality. As both a literal value and a metaphorical one, musicality opens the possibility of a fusion of aesthetics and analysis a coupling analogous to European modernity's twin concerns of art and politics.

Spiritual Radical: Abraham Joshua Heschel in America by Edward K. Kaplan. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Born in Warsaw, reared in a Hasidic community, and reaching maturity in secular Jewish Vilna and cosmopolitan Berlin, Heschel (1907-72) escaped Nazism and immigrated to the U.S. in 1940. This lively and readable book tells the comprehensive story of his life and work in America, describing his politics and personality, and how he came to influence not only Jewish debate but also wider religious and cultural controversies in the postwar decades.

A worthy sequel to his widely praised biography of Heschel's early years, Edward Kaplan's new volume draws on previously unseen archives, FBI files, and interviews with people who knew Heschel, and analyses of his extensive writings. Kaplan explores Heschel's shy and private side, his spiritual radicalism, and his vehement defense of the Hebrew prophets' ideal of absolute integrity and truth in ethical and political life. Of special interest are Heschel's interfaith activities, including a secret meeting with Pope Paul VI during Vatican II, his commitment to civil rights with Martin Luther King, Jr., his views on

the state of Israel, and his opposition to the Vietnam War. A tireless challenger of spiritual and moral complacency, Heschel stands as a dramatically important witness.

Modigliani: A Life by Jeffrey Meyers. Harcourt, Inc.

This vivid biography illuminates Modigliani's Jewish-Italian background and temperament; his intellectual influences; his intense friendships with the writers and printers who came from all over Europe to create the most stimulating artistic milieu of the 20th century; his relations with the most important women in his life; his addiction to absinthe, ether and hashish; his self-destructive impulse; the lifelong tuberculosis that finally killed him; the meaning of his poetry; the significance of his innovative sculpture, portraits and nudes; and his posthumous legend.

Law and Identity in Mandate Palestine by Assaf Likhovski. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

One of the major questions facing the world today is the role of law in shaping identity and in balancing tradition with modernity. In an arid corner of the Mediterranean region in the first decades of the 20th century, Mandate Palestine was confronting these very issues. Assaf Likhovski examines the legal history of Palestine, showing how law and identity interacted in a complex colonial society in which British rulers and Jewish and Arab subjects lived together. Law in Mandate Palestine was not merely an instrument of power or a method of solving individual disputes, says Likhovski. It was also a way of answering the question, "Who are we?" British officials, Jewish lawyers, and Arab scholars all turned to the law in their search for their identities, and all used it to create and disseminate a hybrid culture in which Western and non-Western norms existed simultaneously. Uncovering a rich arsenal of legal distinctions, notions, and doctrines used by lawyers to mediate between different identities, Likhovski provides a comprehensive account of the relationship between law and identity. His analysis suggests a new approach to both the legal history of Mandate Palestine

and colonial societies in general.

An Epitaph for German Judaism: From Halle to Jerusalem by Emil Fackenheim. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Emil Fackenheim's life work was to call upon the world at large and on philosophers, Christians, Jews, and Germans in particular to confront the Holocaust as an unprecedented assault on the Jewish people, Judaism, and all humanity. In this memoir, to which he was making final revisions at the time of his death, Fackenheim looks back on his life, at the profound and painful circumstances that shaped him as a philosopher and a committed Jewish thinker.

Interned for three months in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp after Kristallnacht, Fackenheim was released and escaped to Scotland and then to Canada, where he lived in a refugee internment camp before eventually becoming a congregational rabbi and then, for 35 years, a professor of philosophy. He recalls here what it meant to be a German Jew in North America, the desperate need to respond to the crisis in Europe and to cope with its overwhelming implications for Jewish identity and community. His second great turning point came in 1967, as he saw Jews threatened with another Holocaust, this time in Israel. This crisis led him on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and ultimately back to Germany, where he continued to grapple with the question, How can the Jewish faith and the Christian faith exist after the Holocaust?

Soviet History as it Unfolds

***Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture: 1918-1930* by David Shneer. New York/Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.**

A review essay by Brian Horowitz

I can see a critic approaching this book and taking a cheap shot. He would claim that the book did not hold together, that there was no focus, and write it off. After all, the author speaks about literary institutions in the early Soviet period, individual authors, publishers and censors, the state and ideology, modernization of Yiddish language and thematics of Soviet Yiddish poetry. And that is not an exhaustive list.

But I confess that I enjoyed it a lot. I thought the eclecticism of subjects properly matched the bewildering pace of change and decentralization in literary life in Soviet Russia of the 1920s. I consider it merely a lapse that Professor Shneer did not give a theoretical explanation for his blending together a study of literary institutions and Yiddish literature itself. To my ear, this blending of subjects rang true to the interaction of personal and political fates.

The thesis of the book concerns the mode of writing history. Is there a way to write about the Yiddish culture in early Soviet Russia besides the tragic mode? Seemingly, our knowledge of the tragic end to Yiddish literature and the horrible deaths of individual authors permit no other alternative. But if one could write from the viewpoint not of the end of the experiment, but from the perspective of the unfolding Soviet state, the palette would be far more colorful, since before the repression of all national literatures in 1929, there were opportunities unparalleled for Yiddish literature.

Yiddish received, for the first time in its life, state patronage. This permitted the existence of Yiddish journals, research institutions for linguists and literary scholars, and schools for teachers. But its inevitable alliance with the state was fraught with dangers to its own survival.

The primary theme in the book is state and literature. Shneer only adds nuances to the well-known story concerning the zig-zags in Soviet literary policy, the murky lines of authority in the bureaucracy, and the ultimate hostility to intellectual independence. But the story is told with verve and enthusiasm so that the reader can feel the roller-coaster experience of Yiddish writers who one day might be on top of the heap only to find themselves insecure and fearful the next. His description of Moshe Tayf is emblematic.

Moshe Tayf, the proletarian writer who was the most outspoken critic of VAPP [Jewish Association of Proletariat Writers], found himself on the defensive during the purge. In 1928, Tayf was a member of the Jewish Communist proletarian group, but at the group's 1929 meeting, an announcement was made that because his activity has led to demoralization, Mashe Tayf has been excluded [from the organization].'
[] Tayf did not try to make peace, and instead asked [Alexander] Chemerinsky [chair of the central bureau of Evseksiia] to reprimand [Moshe] Litvakov [the editor of Der Emes] for his anti-Party attitude. Evseksiia, not surprisingly, sided with Litvakov, and Tayf was removed from the Communist group before the April 1929 meeting. In an era of politicization, everyone was vulnerable, and the future of Soviet Jewish culture and the Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia seemed to be up for grabs.
 (p. 173)

The author avoids black and white moralizing. One of his most interesting themes pivots around how writers may be sympathetic heroes in one context only to become oppressors in another. The Yiddish writers we root for in the first two chapters, Moshe Litvakov or Esther Frumkina, who were involved in creating a modern avant-garde in Yiddish, were the same ones who repressed Hebrew language teaching in schools and extinguished private Jewish religious teaching. Still another fascinating theme is how Jewish thematics change with the growing repression of the state. In fact, as Shneer shows with a long analysis of Izi Kharik's poem, "Shtetl," not all proletarian authors were able to write optimistically about the Soviet experiment and meet the growing expectations of the Party for ideologically suitable literature.

In the final analysis, Shneer does not repudiate the thematics of tragedy, but he does suggest that other perspectives can co-exist with the conventional view.

The project to create a secular Yiddish culture and a people who identified with that culture succeeded in 1920s. Secular Yiddish writers penned poetry, school children studied Sholem Aleichem from a Marxist perspective, and Soviet judges conducted trials in Yiddish. But ultimately the project to make Yiddish the marker of Jewish ethnic difference in the Soviet Union did not succeed. By the late 1930s, Jewish children no longer went to Yiddish schools. Birobidzhan did not become the homeland of Soviet Jewry. And, after World War II, Russian replaced Yiddish as the dominant language of Soviet Jews. The overall project did not succeed, because the majority of Soviet Jews did not necessarily support it, and because Stalin had other ideas about the future of Soviet Jewry and the future of ethnic minorities in the Soviet Union. It seems everyone was ambivalent about this project. (p. 219)

As this fragment shows, Shneer has a keen sense of the ambivalence of people and positions, viewing history in terms of people rather than abstract models. This sensitivity permits him to see individuals as free and constantly evolving and history as full of potential. For the historian who rejects a teleological vision, as does Shneer, history remains weighted with potential and freedom. For his subject, Russia from 1917 to 1930, this approach works remarkably well.

Brian Horowitz has also written "Author's Reflections" in this issue.

The Talmud Revisited: Tragedy and “The Oven of Aknai”

By Janet Madden

“There is sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power.” Washington Irving

When I was a child, I read a biography of the Dutch scientist Anton van Leeuwenhoek, who, through the medium of his microscopes, was able to perceive what no human being had ever seen. I was transfixed by the idea of his discovery of entire worlds contained within drops of water, an image that has stayed with me throughout my life and that I recalled as I thought about what aspect of our Talmud studies I wanted to revisit for this final essay. And so, as I have been thinking about *ona’at devarim*, tears and the gates of tears, and the structure and rhythm of the *Aggadah*, I have also been thinking about literary composition, the power of scale, theme, symbols and timing, and how the *Aggadic* exploration of *ona’at devarim* and the power of tears can be viewed through many lenses, each yielding a world of meaning. However, just as I could not recognize or comprehend Bialik’s allusions in “To the Aggadah” to “tears in torrents gushing,” to the “gates of heaven,” to King David and to the *Aggadah* as the expressive heart and heart-strings of the Jewish people before studying the *Aggadic* story of “The Oven of Aknai,” so my understanding of the story, at this introductory stage of my Talmudic development, is rudimentary. Even at my initial readings, the worlds of thematic and symbolic meaning beckoned. But as I continued to ponder “The Oven of Aknai,” I began to consider possibilities that I had not at first perceived.

My revisit to the “The Oven of Aknai” depends, most essentially, on a structural investigation through the prisms of two complementary templates. The first is Aristotle’s definition of tragedy, with which the Rabbis of the first century would have been familiar; the Rabbinic opposition to Greek culture was informed by the Rabbis’ understanding of its attraction. Since classical literatures of antiquity were the results of

lively cross-fertilizations of genres and literary forms, including history, biography, fables, philosophy, popular wisdom, and anecdote, it is not improbable that the Rabbis, too, incorporated cross-cultural genres into their literary composition, the *Aggadah*. And, in order to better understand the underlying structure of “The Oven of Aknai,” it is useful to apply a second, more detailed structural template, Gustav Freytag’s Pyramid, a five-part elucidation of Aristotle’s theory of the elements of drama.

In the strictest sense of the word, “tragedy” refers to drama: a literary composition written for performance by actors, in which a tragic protagonist or hero, a person of virtues and gifts far greater than the ordinary person, suffers a serious misfortune which is not accidental and, therefore, random or meaningless but is significant in that the misfortune is logically connected with the hero’s actions. Tragedy stresses the vulnerability of human beings whose suffering is brought on by a combination of human and divine actions. Tragedy ends in misery for its characters, who fall as a result of an error or frailty, because of external or internal forces or of both. Classical tragedy contains other significant and characteristic elements: a flawed hero, a commentary on the action that is expressed by the chorus, spectacle, dramatic reversal, irony, a final commentary that serves as a revelation. From its inception, tragedy was a public genre; it was intended to be presented in a theater before an audience. But in his *Poetics*, Aristotle pointed out that it is possible to experience the affect of tragedy through private reading. And this shift, from public performance to private reading, raises the logical possibility of a similar modification of genre from drama to narrative.

In applying elements of classical tragedy to “The Oven of Aknai,” the notion of the application and transference of dramatic to narrative form is a tantalizing possibility precisely because of the nature of the *Aggadah*. Unlike the prescriptive formula of *Halacha*, the transmission of the fundamental teachings of the *Aggadah* is accomplished not merely by explicit exegesis, but through the implicit means of allegories and allusions. Its superficial realism, derived through stories of the Rabbis,

only apparently reflects the world of historical reality, and its realistic aspects only thinly veil the inherent structural drama of the three-part interlinked narrative of Rabbi Eliezer. Indeed, if one applies to "The Oven of Aknai" the Aristotelian dramatic structure of beginning, middle and end, and the characterization of genres of literary works into the categories of epic, dramatic, and lyric, then it is not difficult to perceive in this *Aggadic* story the adaptation, or translation, of dramatic form into narrative. Further, the story's narrative incidents have as their purpose precisely what Aristotle defines as the purpose of drama: the arousal of pity and fear in the audience and the accomplishment of a catharsis. Thus, when we further consider the essence of Aristotle's definition of tragedy--beginning in prosperity, ending in adversity--and the focus on the tragic fate of an individual, it is feasible to understand "The Oven of Aknai" as a tragedy cast in narrative form, a mimetic representation of a serious action that extends the magnitude of that seriousness to the audience, and that impresses on the audience the power of the Divine. It is even possible to attribute to either or both R. Gamliel and R. Eliezer the character of the tragic hero; both are exemplars of Rabbinic "royalty" and both can be perceived as the possessors of a fatal flaw. The tragic flaw of R. Eliezer is his insistence on the rightness of his interpretation of *Halacha*, regardless of the price that his individualism exacts from his Rabbinic colleagues and its affect on the Jewish community; that of R. Gamliel is his failure to exert the authority of his position and intervene in order to prevent the *ona'at devarim* of R. Eliezer's excommunication.

The superimposition of Freytag's Pyramid onto "The Oven of Aknai" reveals the extent of the dramatic purpose and structure of the narrative as its development closely parallels the five stages of classical drama: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and catastrophe. Exposition, the initial stage of the drama, as Lajos Egri points out, is integral to the entire work; it is not simply a fixture to be used at the beginning and then discarded, but it establishes the initial conflict. Similarly, exposition in "The Oven of Aknai" does not serve merely to introduce characters its Talmudic purpose extends to the explanation of *onn'aat*,

the proof-text of the appropriate *pasouk*, the comparison of types and degrees of *onna'at*, the illustrative anecdote of *ona'at devarim* and David, the great but flawed leader, explanations of the linkages of *tefillah* and tears and the gates of tears, and the introduction of the power of tears to affect Hashem. All of these themes, definitions, explanations, symbols, and sources introduce and contextualize the character of R. Eliezer, foreshadow the development of the plot, and contribute to thematic motifs.

The rising action of the drama is enacted through the successive tests, or trials, of R. Eliezer. The escalating dispute begins with a disagreement over the status of an oven, an apparently innocuous object that lies at the center of an apparently routine Halachic ruling. The episode begins, almost laconically, with a typically succinct Talmudic statement of differing opinions: "Rabbi Eliezer declares it ritually pure and the Sages declare it ritually impure." Yet an investigation of the complex symbolism of the oven symbolizes the opposing perspectives of R. Eliezer and the Sages and the enormity of what is at stake. For this is no mere academic argument, or even a theological discourse. Rather, the contest between R. Eliezer and his rabbinic colleagues over whether the oven should be considered as a series of segments or as a complete entity signifies a contest of values that pits autonomy against communality.

R. Eliezer neither accepts the status of minority opinion nor "incline[s]" himself to accommodate the opinion of the majority. He is unbendingly insistent on his correctness; he is convinced that "the *Halacha* is with me." And, in opposition to R. Eliezer's refusal to yield to the majority viewpoint, to his display of his unnatural abilities as he persists in his argument and calls on the carob tree, the water and the walls of the *Beit Midrash* to act in opposition to their natures in order to affirm the rightness his point of view, the other Sages surround him with their opposition and mass together, ready to strike like the coiled snake that gives the oven its name. The dramatic exhibitions that take place at R. Eliezer's behest embody the element of spectacle in classical drama. But the dynamism of spectacle the jumping tree, the waters that

reverse their courses and the leaning walls does not move the Sages. Each successive unnatural act underscores the unnatural combative stance of the adamant R. Eliezer and serves only to harden their determined opposition.

In choosing compromise, neither falling nor standing erect, the walls of the *Beit Midrash* enact the choice of compromise, exemplifying the middle way: respect both for R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua. The walls “remain leaning to this day,” a reminder both of the historic dispute and of the possibility of compromise. But, as the tension heightens, it becomes clear that although the walls apparently have been influenced by the learning that has taken place within them, for the unyielding R. Eliezer and his opponents, there is so much at stake in this contest that it cannot accommodate compromise; it must end with one side victorious and the other vanquished.

Of the many literary devices that the *Aggadah* employs to convey the intensity of the rising action of the plot, symbolism is the most powerful; the title of “The Oven of Aknai” encapsulates two potent images. An oven is a matrix; it is intimately connected with fire, the agent of purification and destruction, and, in doubled irony, the oven is the object of contested purity that foreshadows the Sages’ burning of every object that R. Eliezer has declared ritually pure. Since ovens, fires and furnaces symbolize spiritual trial, the dispute over the oven becomes the appropriate medium for the spiritual contest between R. Eliezer and the Sages. Ovens are also troped as mother-symbols, and the centrality of the oven also prepares the reader for the crucial role of the symbolically-named Imma Shalom, who protects her brother through watching over her husband and whose own spiritual trial is expressed in her final words, since she knows, better even than her husband, the power of tears.

The coiled snake-shape of the circular oven is reminiscent of the *ou-roboros*, the Greek image of the essential oneness of life that often is accompanied by the maxim “One is all” an ironic counterpoint to the deep division between of R. Eliezer and the other Sages. The symbol of

the snake in the ancient world, including the cultures of Egypt, Greece and Rome, was widespread, and its significance was of a dual nature, associated with both destructive and protective powers. In Torah, too, the snake is a potent symbol, and it figures prominently at two seminal junctures the story of *Gan Eden* in *Beresheit* and in Moses' setting the brass serpent on a pole in *B'midbar* at G-d's behest, both as an antidote to venomous snakebites and to attract the people's eyes from earthly chaos to focus, instead, on the heavens. In similar vein, the snake-shaped-and-named coiled oven, the catalyst that exposes the poisonous dispute between R. Eliezer and the Sages, embodies the potential for destruction or protection of both R. Eliezer and R. Gamliel and of life itself. This moral tale for the Jewish people makes clear, as its plot unfolds, that the escalation of differing viewpoints into *onna'at devarim* can, indeed, end in the shedding of blood.

The oven itself has almost been forgotten by the time of the emergence of the fourth, and final, dramatic spectacle, although the oven serves as the symbolic crucible of the increasingly heated dispute. Since four is the number of the totality of the created and the revealed, this episode is immediately recognizable as the most powerful spectacle yet; evidence for R. Eliezer's rightness moves from the earthly to the heavens. But, when the "heavenly voice" asserts that "The *Halacha* is in accordance with [R. Eliezer] everywhere," the Sages refuse to accept that the opinion of one can override that of the majority; their spokesman, R. Yehoshua, "[rises] to his feet" in protest and defies the *bat kol's* partisanship of R. Eliezer by declaring that the Torah "is not in Heaven." His point is that the power of authoritative interpretation is invested in the concurrence of the majority, and that neither R. Eliezer's nor the *bat kol's* assertions can be accepted even if the opinion of a single Rabbi is, in fact, correct, if the majority does not accept that view, then the *Halacha* is not "with him" it is with the ruling of the majority. G-d's laugh and the repeated phrase "My sons have defeated me," mark the ending of this scene, but not the ending of the narrative. And in fact, this scene, which might at first appear to be a solution, is quickly revealed to be the preparation for the narra-

tive's crisis, since G-d's response confirms that the view supported by the majority must be accepted.

The climax, or turning point, of "The Oven of Aknai" comes on "that day," through R. Eliezer's refusal to accept what even G-d acknowledges as the Sages' correctness in holding to the position that agreement by the majority determines *Halacha*. But, rather than displaying magnanimity in the justification of their position and in the Divine sanction of their victory, the Sages reveal their corruption by the snake-oven; instead of acting from the position of *chesed* or *rachamim*, they publicly shame R. Eliezer *in absentia* by venomously and ostentatiously burning of all of the objects that he had declared ritually pure. Thus, since public humiliation is tantamount to murder, they publicly execute his rabbinic reputation. But the Sages do not stop at merely destroying his reputation they vote for R. Eliezer's excommunication in his absence, so that he is entirely ignorant of their vote, thus destroying his rabbinic identity without permitting him the opportunity for self-defense. In ignoring the dicta that all Israel is responsible for one another, that one should not wrong his neighbor, and that one who causes *ona'at devarim* in public forfeit his share in the world-to-come, the Sages clearly indicate that they are not motivated merely by the desire to settle matters of *Halacha*. In intentionally and publicly inflicting *ona'at devarim* upon R. Eliezer, the Sages forfeit their claim to wisdom as surely as they display their own spiritual impurity; appropriately, the revelation of their spiritual nadir comes at the height of narrative tension.

As the narrative structure shifts from climax to falling action, so the behavior of the Sages contrasts with the act of one man. Only Rabbi Akiva, R. Eliezer's student, exhibits sensitivity both to the plight of his teacher and to the inevitable Divine repercussions of the Sages' behavior in knowingly and deliberately harming R. Eliezer by *ona'at devarim*. But R. Akiva's delicate and oblique announcement to R. Eliezer of his condition of living death cannot soften the Sages' blow. R. Akiva's careful introduction of mourning clothing and customs as signifiers of his teacher's condition cannot obviate R. Eliezer's pain; R.

Eliezer rends his garments and removes his shoes, sits on the ground “like a mourner,” and his eyes stream “with tears of pain and anguish.” And his tears of anguish engender Divine wrath. The “immediate” consequences of R. Eliezer’s tears are that one-third of olives, a crop associated with peace, and one-third of wheat and barley crops, grains associated in the ancient world with life after death as well as with earthly sustenance, are destroyed.

The toll of the Sages’ actions is laid at the door of all, but for Rabban Gamliel, Gaon of the Yavneh academy, and R. Eliezer’s brother-in-law, there is especial culpability: due to his position, he is responsible for the actions of the Sages. Indeed, when the wave a watery symbol of destruction that has swollen in volume from the streams of R. Eliezer’s tears rises against him, ready to drown him, R. Gamliel does not pretend to be ignorant of the reason. He acknowledges that “this can only be happening to me because of the anguish caused to Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus.” The only word missing in his acknowledgment is “I”, but, as he rises in the self-defense that has been denied R. Eliezer and gives his explanation “no individual, great as he may be, should reject a decision reached by the majority, so that controversies will not multiply in Israel” the sea “rest[s]” from its wrath. But rest is not cessation. R. Gamliel makes no overture of reconciliation to R. Eliezer; his excommunication is not nullified, his anguish is not assuaged. R. Gamliel does not exert his leadership to repair the consequences of the *onna’at devarim* that has devastated his brother-in-law, and his failure to act presages the end of the narrative.

The catastrophe, or conclusion, of “The Oven of Aknai” concerns the aftermath of R. Eliezer’s excommunication. Imma Shalom attempts to shield her brother, R. Gamliel, from the inevitable consequences of her husband’s tears by preventing R. Eliezer from falling on his face during *Tachanun*, the prayer during which he pours out his grief and engages in supplication. Her attempt to save her brother’s life while fully and clearly understanding the power of her husband’s tears is all the more poignant because Imma Shalom like her brother has learned from childhood but, unlike him, remembered--that the gates of tears are

never locked and that G-d "will not hold [his] peace at [one's] tears."

But the mighty nexus of tears and Tachanun can only be postponed, not negated. Thus, predictably, in the manner of tragedies, Imma Shalom's watchfulness is subverted. Her miscalculation of the time of the moon, an important marker of time in the Jewish calendar, a symbol specifically associated with the feminine principle and with tides, is also subtly connected to an oven, as she brings bread to the poor man the stranger who has come to her door. The inextricability of life and death is signaled by the connection of time, food and death: at the very time that she provides life-giving sustenance, her brother dies. As she makes clear when she tells her husband, "You have killed my brother" in advance of the shofar that announces his death, the truly wise Imma Shalom has always understood her early lessons.

As she pronounces the dramatic epilogue, the tradition that Imma Shalom learned in the house of her grandfather of the power of tears to pass through the unlocked "gates of *onna'ah*," she both provides the final comment on the moral lesson of the narrative and a warning for B'nai Israel. Fulfilling the precepts of tragedy, we are left with Aristotle's catharsis, a purifying of the emotions that is brought about through the evocation of intense fear and pity. The teaching of "The Oven of Aknai" is complete; the reader has learned, from the collective guilt of the Rabbis themselves, of the terrible power of *onnaa't devarim* and the even greater power of tears to move G-d to provide justice, however severe, for the afflicted.

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Tourist Heaven

A poem by Richard E. Sherwin

Here's a map of heaven. You're here. How
you got here I won't ask. You're here. Follow
the path I've marked you'll get where all your fellow
atheists fanatics sit and howl.

No nothingness you wanted. No virgins either.
Yes there is a Gd but she's not in to
martyrs murderers or reason spinners.
Maybe tomorrow. Meanwhile, pie in the sky.

Your pissed to be here, at all, or so unpraised?
Relax. Satan's hungry for you, his stomachs
rumbling, listen. No that isn't thunder.
Relax. Heaven's your punishment. Today.

Don't count on it lasting though. She's fickle and subtle.
Howl while you can. What's next may not be fun.

Traduttore, Traditore?

Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation

By Naomi Seidman. University of Chicago Press.

A review essay by Peter J. Haas

In the epilogue to this book, Naomi Seidman notes that she once considered (whether seriously or not) calling her book “Entdecktes Judenthum (Judaism Unmasked)” in maybe a mocking reference to the famous late 17th century anti-Semitic composition of Johann Eisenmenger. The connection is that in the volume before us, Seidman “unmasks” the varieties of concealments that have been bound up with the translation of Jewish texts into non-Jewish languages. What differentiates Seidman’s book from Eisenmenger’s (among other things) is her premise that such disconnects and distortions are simply part of the translation enterprise altogether, an enterprise fraught with all sorts of social, ideological and theological baggage, especially when the translations runs from Jewish texts into Christian languages. I suppose to some extent this is obvious. But in the course of teasing out these complexities, Seidman introduces us in a compelling and fascinating way to the multi-layered and cultural entangled relations between Jews and Christians (or of Judaism and Christianity) over the past two millennia.

That speculative title aside, the actual title of the book also tells us a lot about the central problematic which animates this work. Let me spend a moment on deconstructing the title, a maneuver fully in accord with the way the book itself operates. On its simplest (dare I say “peshat”) level, the title “Faithful Renderings” suggests the issue of how one renders the meaning of one language into another language in a way that is responsible or “faithful” to the original. But the book is also about how the whole notion of translation is a central node of disagreement between the two great faiths of Judaism and Christianity. In other words, how writers within each community understand what it means to translate the Bible is itself a differentiating theme between

these two faiths. This is true both on the micro scale that is, on how does one translates certain words or passages, such as Isaiah's "betulah" (a "virgin" or just a "young woman") and on the macro scale: Christianity as a (mis) translation of Judaism. The possibility of these two interpretations of "faithful" in the title already hints, as the author makes clear in her introduction, that this book is not merely about the pitfalls of translations, but about translation between faiths, and in particular how Judaism and Christianity differ at a very foundation level precisely over their diverse faiths' attitudes toward translation and translations.

There is, however, another ambiguity in the title. We take the word "rendering" in the title to be referring to the act of interpreting a text. One can be said to be giving a good rendition of a piece of music, for example, if the musician does a commendable job of turning the notes on the score into the kind of sound the composer more or less had in mind. But "render" has another meaning as well, namely, giving something up "render unto Caesar"); or even in a more basic form "rend", to tear up completely. So a faithful rendition is also a giving up of something in order to be more faithful to a higher need. Thus one could argue on several levels about what it means to say that Christianity is a "faithful rendition" of Judaism. It is in this very act of trying to "translate" the title that we enter into the central problematic of the book.

It should be clear by now, that Seidman's central thesis is that a culture's attitude to translation has something to do with its attitude about itself. Translation opens one's work, of course, to the broader world. This is a parlous move, however, because breaking down barriers not only can diminish misunderstandings, but it also can expose the source to outside criticism and challenge. This openness to outsiders is especially fraught when the two religious traditions in question are Judaism and Christianity, with their long history of mutual suspicions. Examining the translation of Judaism (Bible, Talmud, etc.) into Christianity is thus to enter an extraordinarily complicated relationship. The book works through its problematic in roughly historical

sequence, starting in the Greco-Roman world and ending in modern America, traversing the Lutheran Reformation, the Germany of Buber and Rosenzweig, and the Holocaust along the way. As one reaches the end it is clear that in some sense we are back at the beginning; the same issues continue as a thread throughout.

Chapter One ("Immaculate Translation: Sexual Fidelity, Textual Transmission and the Virgin Birth") deals with Matthew 1:23's citation of Isaiah 7:14 concerning the birth of a child to a certain woman. Matthew has "virgin," drawing upon the Septuagint's Greek translation ("parthenos") of what is taken to be the original Hebrew "alma," which presumably means something like "maiden." This pivotal disagreement in the two languages as to the status of the mother gives Seidman the occasion to examine exactly what is a translation and what is not. The chapter is thick with discussion about whether the Greek is a "translation" or an "interpretation," whether the Hebrew we now have ("alma") is really original or is itself a Jewish back (mis-) translation and whether at the end of the day the answers to any of these questions really makes a difference. This discussion recapitulates in many ways the whole relationship between Judaism and Christianity (is one a translation of the other, a mistranslation of the other, an interpretation of the other, does it even matter?) The chapter also spends considerable time considering the "foundation myth" of the Septuagint, namely the Letter of Aristeas and the long tradition of similar stories of the 70 (or 72) Jewish translators who were gathered in Egypt and miraculously produced a single consensus translation. What the story and its offspring are all about, Seidman tells us, is the very nature of translation enterprise altogether. The story, and its variations, are all meant to tell us that fully accurate translations are in fact possible, at least for the Bible. What is at issue among the variations is what exactly it is that is being translated: the words of the original, the meaning of the original, or in a sense the Urtext, that is the divine Word (or Logos) that was first "translated" into Hebrew and now is being translated into Greek. And what are we to make of the later rabbinic tradition that the translators in Egypt purposely introduced "mistakes"; or Jerome's

contention to his Christian readers that it was not the Septuagint that was authentic after all, but the Hebrew? Interlaced with all these questions is the image of the virgin, and the constant reference to sexuality and gender intertwined with the whole process of bringing a text and a translator together into a holy bond to produce a translation/offspring. In one of her several allusions along these lines, Seidman cites Derrida, for example, who proclaims that we “will never have, and in fact have never had, any ‘transfer’ of pure signifieds from one language to another, or within one language which would be left virgin and intact by the signifying instruments of ‘vehicles.’” (p. 65).

Just as the Septuagint represents a model of a truly inspired translation that preserves the meaning of the original Sense (with a capital “S”) in another language, so does Aquilas (or Onqelos as he is known in the rabbinic tradition) represent the slavish, literalist approach that translates word for word, creating in the end a translation that is in a barely understandable “artificial” language. This is the subject of the second Chapter (“The Beauty of Greece in the Tents of Shem’: Aquila between the Camps”). Aquilas in fact went so far as to create a new Aramaic word (“yat”) to translate the untranslatable Hebrew word that marks the direct object (“et”). Seidman’s question, of course, is what are we to make of this strange translation. Set against a complex theological and historical background, the perception has emerged that a translation of the “spirit” of the text is more characteristic of Christianity, while Judaism tends toward a literalist approach. Seidman rightly notes that Paul’s distinction between letter and spirit could not have been meant to separate Jews from Christians, since he did not yet know of that religious difference. Yet these two distinct approaches to translation did indeed exist among Jews, as it did among Greeks. Nonetheless, Seidman goes on to argue, there is some truth in the claim that there was a “Jewish” emphasis on letters and words as bearers of meaning, just as there was a notion of the Jewish body as being the bearer of the divine, in the form of (physical) circumcision. In the context of this understanding, Seidman cites a passage from the midrash (Exodus Rabbah 30:12) in which Aquilas himself wanted

to be circumcised before studying Torah. Here then lies the answer to the question of how we are to think of Aquilas as translator. Aquilas' translation of the Torah into a kind of Hebraized Greek was an act, as it were, of Judaizing or "circumcising" the Greek language. Not only that, but in so doing, Aquilas was asserting Jewish superiority over the (Greek-speaking) Roman Empire. In this regard the act of translation, especially of Aquilas' sort, can be seen as a profoundly political (one might say anti-colonialist) act.

Chapter Three ("False Friends: Conversion and Translation from Jerome to Luther") turns our attention to much later translators, especially Martin Luther. The interesting point about Martin Luther's translation, for Seidman, is that he, in effect, tried to erase the presence of Judaism altogether. To illustrate this point, Seidman shows the lengths to which Luther went to demystify the tetragrammaton and the notion of the "Shem HaMeforash" (the secret name of the deity made up of a special arrangement of Hebrew letters). The peculiarities of Hebrew and Jewish tradition are thereby shown to be irrelevant. The result was that under his hand, Hebrew emerged as just another language with nothing particularly "Judaic" about it, thus making the Bible fully translatable, without remainder, into any other human language. On one level, Luther excluded the Jew from his translation simply by not relying on Jewish tutors or experts, in contrast to the standard practice of so many of his humanist contemporaries. On another level, however, Luther excluded the Jews by virtually manufacturing a vernacular German language so that the figures of the Bible not only spoke German directly, but as Seidman puts it, so that they would speak as Germans. Jews and Judaism were simply not relevant, and their Torah just another text.

The other side of making Hebrew just another language, was to at least imply that the Judaic tradition was not in principle secret or closed off to others. In theory, anyone could learn Hebrew and read the allegedly esoteric Hebrew literature for oneself. This in turn often put Jews in an awkward position. Translators who had converted from Judaism, for example, had as their strongest selling point their

supposed knowledge of the “secret code” of Hebrew and so would be able to tell Christians what was really being said in the rabbinic texts. Hence, ironically, “Jewish” translators like Johannes Pfefferkorn had a built-in reason to denigrate the Judaism they left, while on the other hand Christian Hebraists like Johannes Reuchlin saw nothing particularly sinister in the Jewish texts at all. Jewish disputants like Jehiel of Paris, who was involved in a famous disputation with Nicholas Donin, could argue along the same lines that there was nothing evil or secret about the Talmud at all, and in fact if Christians were to read it they would find nothing of particular interest in it. Thus translation came to be a very political and loaded act during the Reformation. But the implications can be pressed even further. For Seidman, the falsity of the convert-translator is parallel to the falsity of Luther’s translation in which the angels speak German, but also parallel to the very act of conversion itself. Conversion is, after all, a kind of translation in its own way, as shown by the change of names (Saul to Paul, for example). And just like there were a variety of translations, and mutual mistrust about what was being translated and why, so too were there suspicions on both sides as to the sincerity of the convert.

Chapter Four (“A Translator Culture”) deals with the “translation culture” of Mendelssohn, Buber and Rosenzweig. The thesis of the chapter can be easily summarized as built on the premise that Hebrew-German textual translation is a reflection of the nineteenth century Jewish-German cultural conversation (p. 155). Thus, for example, Mendelssohn’s Bible translation was, like Mendelssohn himself, a moment allowing the Jews entry into Germanhood. This may be what Mendelssohn meant when he referred to his translation as a first step in bringing his Jewish readers toward culture. In this sense, the translation can be seen, drawing on Homi Bhabha, as the gift of the assimilated natives to their colonizers. Or, to take a slightly different tack, the translation from the Hebrew of the (male) yeshivah student to the common language of the (female) market and home, could be taken as a gesture towards feminizing the Jewish male. But this premise, Seidman points out, is suspect. It assumes that Jews and Hebrew are sort of organically

linked, as might be the German language and the German volk. That equivalence is, of course, false; although to be sure it was taken up by some Zionists. If there was a language that masses of Jews spoke, it was not Hebrew but Yiddish, itself taken to be a butchered German. Furthermore, the Buber-Rosenzweig German-language Bible was meant not just for German Christians, but also (or especially?) for German-speaking Jews. Thus, like Mendelssohn's work, it was a kind of hybrid. But while Mendelssohn's translation was to make Jews similar to Germans, the Buber-Rosenzweig translation, by emphasizing the Jewishness of the Bible, was designed to make room for Jews as Jews in German culture (a sort of anti-Luther, as it were). If Mendelssohn was the good colonial; Buber-Rosenzweig were resisters. Once again we see that the work of translation is tightly bound up with questions of politics and assimilation. This discussion thus comes back to a consistent theme going back to the Septuagint and Aquilas, namely the supposed dichotomy between letter and spirit. It should come as no surprise, then, that the chapter ends with a lengthy discussion of the linguistic theories of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin argued for the utter distinctiveness of each language and the resultant freedom of the translator. But this very notion of language as utterly distinct to a people was a highly charged statement in the Germany of the 1930's.

Chapter Five ("The Holocaust in Every Tongue") turns attention to the Holocaust, and the ways in which it might be possible to "translate" the pain of the victims into another idiom. Seidman here then draws a surprising, and surprisingly fruitful, parallel to the Bible. There too there was a story of a particular Jewish suffering that through a translation (the Septuagint) became a sacred text for a whole civilization. The same, Seidman claims, is true of Holocaust literature. Once translated, it turned the Jewish catastrophe into a world-wide paradigm. And the parallels do not stop there. Just as in the case of the Hellenistic diaspora where Jews themselves learned of their sacred history through a translation, so too do modern American (and Israeli) Jews learn the sacred lessons of the Holocaust through translations. But what really captures the author's attention is the history of the

writing of *Night*, which began in Yiddish, but then appeared in French and is known to most of us in English. Seidman is interested in these three linguistic versions and in some of the “adjustments” made to the Yiddish story when the manuscript was being prepared for a more general, and so more gentile, readership. Also of interest are all the versions and the different accounts of Wiesel’s meeting with Francois Mauriac which resulted in Wiesel’s decision to break his silence and publish the book in the first place. Indeed, the book suggests, the authorial history of *Night* is as complex as that of the Septuagint. This chapter ends with an example of what one might say is a mistranslation of the Holocaust built out of a series of purposeful mistranslations; namely, Roberto Benigni’s film, “Life is Beautiful.”

The final chapter, “Translation and Assimilation: Singer in America” (the writer in question is Isaac Bashevis Singer) has to do with the survival of Yiddish literature, but in America and in translation. The connection with the twisted genealogy of Elie Wiesel’s *Night* (with its Yiddish urtext) is clear. What also comes through strongly is the question as to the extent to which the “Jewishness” of Yiddish can make it over the translational divide into English. Like in Alexandria or Germany, translation from a specifically Jewish text into a non-Jewish language is a metonym for assimilation. The rest of the chapter revolves around the issues of translation as regards two of Singer’s works, “Gimpel the Fool” and “Zeidlus the Pope.” In both works, but especially the second, one of the issues is how the character’s relationship to Christianity can be transferred out of its Yiddish context. In particular, for example, how can one make Zeidlus’ (Zaydlus’) explanation of his Christian experience, articulated in the very Jewish idiom of Yiddish, work the same way when expressed in a “Christian” language like English? What comes across as comic hybridity in the original, comes across quite differently to the English reader.

At the end the reader is confronted with the conundrum of the title: what is a “faithful” rendering of a Jewish sacred text into a non-Jewish language. The book obviously does not (and cannot) give an answer. But by reading the question through a variety of social, cultural,

ideological and theological lenses, it deconstructs the question and reconstructs it into something much larger. What one comes away with is a strong sense of how through two millennia of “exile,” Judaism has been revealed and distorted; discovered and synthesized. And maybe behind it all is the question, never addressed, but often implied, as to whether or not there is a “real” Judaism out there, or whether all we ever have, even as Jews is (in all its ambiguity) a “faithful rendering.”

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